

School Picture Set

A History of Musical Instruments

The Metropolitan Museum of Art



A HISTORY OF MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

by Edith Watts

The shapes and sounds of instruments follow fashions in music. When musical styles change, instruments change, too. In the Middle Ages, when this history begins, woodwinds, strings, and drums accompanied folk singing and dancing. Most written music, however, was for the church and was sung, not played. It was not until the Renaissance, about 1400 to 1600, that instrumental music became an art separate from singing and dancing.

Renaissance composers gave each instrument an equal voice in their works. A fashion of the 17th century was to play solo instruments against an orchestral background. This new, dramatic style, the Baroque, emphasized grandeur in all the arts. No wonder opera was a Baroque idea.

Except for opera and church music, concerts were exclusive affairs performed in palaces by orchestras of strings and woodwinds. After about 1750 concerts were held in large public halls. Composers required powerful orchestras with a variety of instruments that could express different emotions. New kinds of instruments were added to the concert orchestra. Keys and valves were designed for instruments that could not otherwise play all the notes of the scale. From this period, which lasted through the 19th century, came the symphony and symphony orchestra, and the accuracy and expressiveness of modern instruments.

Composers today, inspired by outer space, inner feelings, folk music, machines, and electronic devices, are creating new instruments and discovering new ways of playing the old ones.



1. **HARP PLAYER**, King David, detail of an anonymous woodcut, from the *Nuremberg Bible*, German, 1483. *Harris Brisbane Dick Fund*, 1931

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Archaeologists have found harps nearly five thousand years old in royal graves of Asia Minor. During the Middle Ages harps similar to the one held by this king were carried from castle to castle by minstrels, who spread the latest news and entertained with songs and juggling. To become members of the symphony orchestra, harps have had to grow. Modern harps have forty-seven strings and seven pedals, which enable each string to produce three different tones. Hence, the harp can sound all the whole notes and half notes of the scale.



2. **MEDIEVAL FIDDLE** (detail), tempera on wood, by an unknown Spanish painter, middle of the 15th century. *The Michael Friedsam Collection, 1931*

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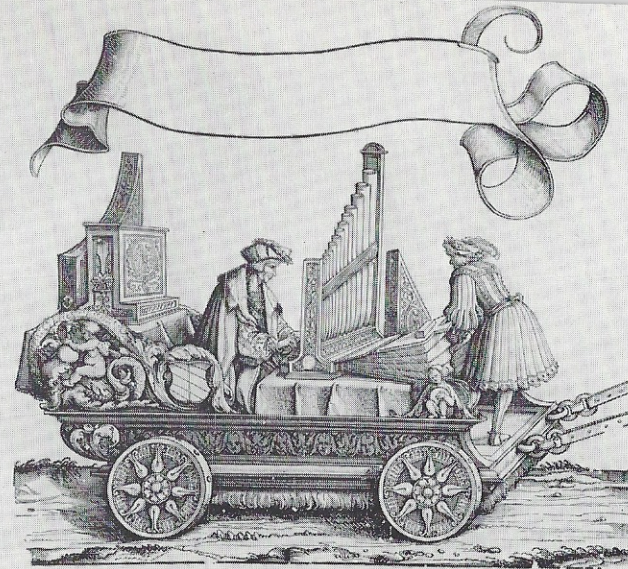
This courtly lady is playing an ancestor of the violin. Fiddles of various designs were the most popular instruments in the Middle Ages.



3. **ANGEL WITH A LUTE**, painted wood, south German, about 1500. *The Cloisters Collection. Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 1947*

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Lutes, fiddles, organs, trumpets, and drums were brought to Europe from the Near East during the early Middle Ages. Our word "lute" comes from the Arabic name for the instrument, *el oud* (el ood). This carved-wood angel, plucking the strings of a lute, is one of a pair that once decorated a German chapel.



4. **ORGAN**, woodcut, by Hans Burgkmair the Elder (1473–1531), German, from *The Triumphal Procession of Emperor Maximilian I.* Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1932

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In the Middle Ages people complained that organs crashed like thunder. An organ in Winchester, England, needed seventy men to pump the bellows and two players to work the sliders that let air into the pipes. On Renaissance organs the sliders were replaced with keyboards, which made playing easier and more accurate. Large organs had more pipes to sound great chords and to imitate flutes and other instruments. This small organ was designed for royal processions. The man on the right pumps a bellows that blows air into the pipes.



5. **MUSIC PARTY** (detail), engraving, by Abraham Bosse, French, 17th century. *Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1926*

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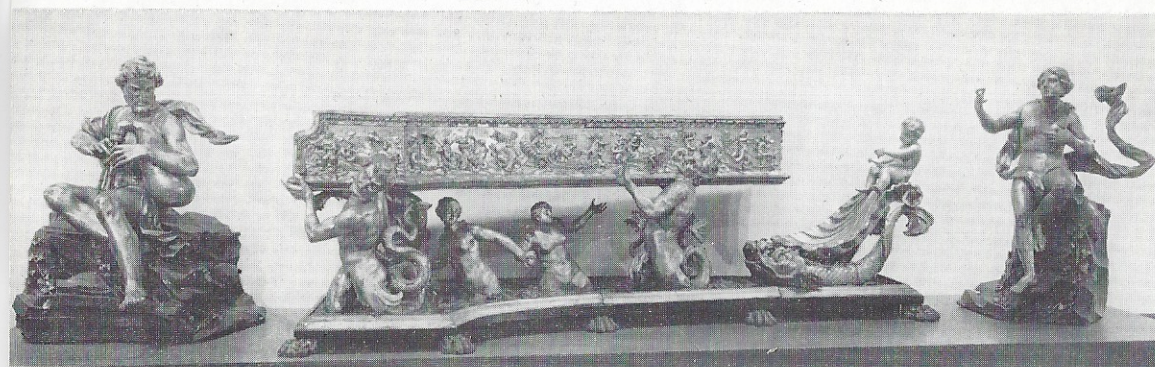
A favorite pastime in the 16th and 17th centuries was to sing and to play instruments. The woman in the center plays a lute, as popular then as the piano is today. The man on the right bows a viola da gamba. *Da gamba* is Italian for "of the leg." The instrument was so named because, large or small, it was held on or between the legs. The lute and the viola da gamba were given graceful shapes and decorations by Renaissance instrument-makers, who wished to please the eye as well as the ear.



6. **HARPSICHORD**, painted and gilded wood, Italian, 18th century. *Anonymous Donor, 1945*

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When you press a harpsichord key, it pushes up a piece of wood called a "jack." At right angles to the top of the jack is a quill or leather plectrum that plucks the string. In the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries the harpsichord was a popular solo instrument and an essential member of almost every orchestra. The harpsichord player often acted as conductor. Recently, harpsichords have reappeared in concert music and have been used in jazz.



7. **GILDED HARPSICHORD**, wood, Italian, 17th century. *Gift of Mrs. John Crosby Brown, 1889*
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Carved-wood figures of sea gods from ancient Greek myths support and surround this three-hundred-year-old harpsichord. The player could accompany himself by working a hidden keyboard that sounded the bagpipes held by the figure on the left. Originally this musical sculpture occupied a palace room that had stucco mountains and a painted landscape as a backdrop. Such dramatic and rich decoration is typical of the Baroque style.



8. **GUITAR PLAYER** (detail), oil on canvas, by Jean Antoine Watteau (1684-1721), French. *Munsey Fund*, 1934
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This sad clown in his striped satin suit was one of the Italian comedians who were famous in Paris during the 17th and 18th centuries. He and his fellow clowns brought the guitar, long a favorite in Italy and Spain, to Northern Europe. There it rapidly became a popular instrument among professionals and amateurs.



9. **CHAMBER CONCERT** (detail), engraving, by Saint Aubin, French, 18th century. *Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1933*
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Much of the instrumental music of the 17th and early 18th centuries is called chamber music because it was performed in special music rooms, or chambers, in the palaces of nobles and kings. Here Louis XV and his court enjoy a concert being played on a harpsichord, cello, violin, and flute. Beside King Louis is a harp. Can you see the instruments that decorate the walls of his music room?

10.

**FAMILY OF
RECORDERS,**
wood, metal, and
ivory, German, 18th
century. *Gift of Mrs.
John Crosby Brown,
1889*

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The recorder is like a whistle. Your breath blows against the sharp edge of a hole just below the mouthpiece, setting the sound waves in motion. The longer the recorder, the lower the notes it will sound. The recorder on the right, which is $3\frac{1}{2}$ feet long, has a tube for the mouth and one key for the lowest note. Without these, the player's fingers could not have covered all the holes. Bach and Handel wrote beautiful parts for the recorder, but in the 19th century the recorder's place in the orchestra was taken by the flute.

11.

VIOLIN, by Antonius
Stradivarius, Italian, 1717.
*Bequest of Annie Bolton
Matthews Bryant, 1933*

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The Italians were the first great violin-makers. Over two hundred and fifty years ago Stradivarius so perfected the violin's shape and tone that since then violins have hardly changed. Other Europeans, however, preferred members of the viol family, including the delicate-voiced viola da gamba (see no. 5). They felt the thicker strings of the violin produced too loud a sound. Late in the 18th century the violin and its family, the viola, cello, and bass violin, won out over the viol family, which lacked the power required by the growing symphony orchestra.



12. PIANO, wood and ivory, by Bartolomeo Cristofori, Italian, 1721. Gift of Mrs. John Crosby Brown, 1889

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This is the oldest piano in existence, made in 1721 by an Italian, Bartolomeo Cristofori. It is very much like the harpsichord except for the action of its keys. Cristofori replaced the plucking devices of the harpsichord with striking hammers, because he wanted to make an instrument that could express many gradations from soft to loud. His invention was called a "*gravicembalo con piano e forte*" or "harpsichord with soft and loud." In the 18th and 19th centuries the English and Germans perfected the piano mechanically, and it replaced the harpsichord as the most popular keyboard instrument.



13. **FLUTE PLAYER**, tile, French, about 1730. *Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917*

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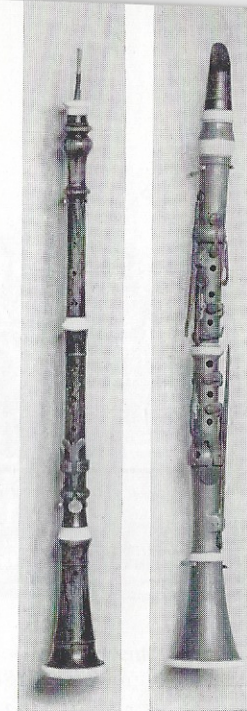
The flute is often called a woodwind because it was made of wood until the 19th century. In 1847 Theodore Boehm, a German flute-maker, perfected the modern silver flute. He completely reorganized the fingering and keys, greatly improving the flute's accuracy in playing the scale. Earlier flutes, resembling the one played by the musician on this tile, had open finger holes like the recorder's. Even the most skilled player could not always produce clear, true notes.

14.

OBOE, wood and ivory,
French, 18th century. *Gift
of Mrs. John Crosby Brown,
1889*

CLARINET, wood and
ivory, French, 19th century.
*The Crosby Brown Collec-
tion, 1889*

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Reed instruments are sounded by blowing against a reed that vibrates in the upper end of the tube. The oboe has two reeds pressed tightly together like the flattened end of a soda straw. Since the late 17th century the oboe's clear, penetrating voice has been popular in concert music. The clarinet with its single reed did not become well known until almost one hundred years later. Mozart was the first great composer to recognize how much richness and warmth the clarinet could add to the orchestra.



19. **MASQUERADE IN NAPLES** (detail), engraving, by Raphael Morghen, Italian, 1778. *Harris Brisbane Dick Fund*, 1940
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In the 17th century the Ottoman Turks threatened to conquer Eastern Europe. Their armies were accompanied by mounted bands, whose shrill oboes, trumpets, and drums encouraged their own forces and terrified the enemy. By the 18th century people in Europe found it amusing to have their own "Turkish" bands. Often they performed in costume parades like this one. Our military bands of today come from this Turkish fashion.

ON THE COVER: Musicians, detail of a woodcut, by
Hans Burgkmair the Elder (1473–1531), German,
from *The Triumphal Procession of Emperor Max-
imilian I.* Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1932